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Christian union

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CHRISTIAN UNION

BY

JAMES LEDIARD.

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OWEN SOUND:
Printed at the Northern Business College Steam Printing Office.
1893.

TO MY BRETHREN IN THE MINISTRY,

AND

TO ALL WHO "LOVE OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST IN SINCERITY," AND DESIRE TO SEE THAT UNION AMONGST HIS PEOPLE,

FOR WHICH CHRIST

PRAYED,

THIS TRACT IS DEDICATED,

WITH THE HOPE THAT IT MAY HELP FORWARD SO DESIRABLE A MOVEMENT.

Sincerely yours,

JAMES LEDIARD,

Pastor, Church of Christ (Disciples), Owen Sound, Ont.

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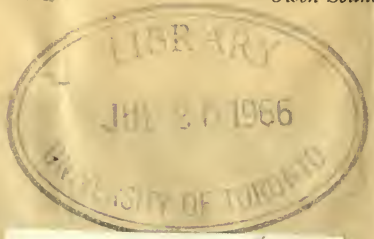

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Christian Union.

"NOW I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Introduction.

The union of all God's people is a question of ever increasing importance. It is the great question of the present time. All good Christians desire it and pray for it, while quite a number have grave doubts as to its possibility or even its desirability. The attitude of the Disciples of Christ towards this question is well known. It is one of the main objects of their existence as a people. Counting all divisions as sin, and contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ, and, seeing clearly that true union must be upon the basis of truth, and truth only, they have with great constancy taught the importance of a return to the faith and practice of apostolic days, to the teaching of Christ and his apostles, as the true and only possible way to a united church. Merely adjusting ourselves to human opinions, or agreeing to submit ourselves to the wisest human arrangements, will not lead to the desired end, but a return to the *faith* and *practice* and *spirit* of the New Testament will. In the details of the churches' work, and in connection with her worship, uniformity may neither be possible nor desirable, and all methods and arrangements of a purely human character, may be safely left to the wise judgement of God's people in the varied circumstances in which they may be

placed. But where God has spoken, men must listen and obey. In all matters of faith, there must be absolute loyalty, and this is unity. In all matters of opinion there must be liberty and this prevents uniformity. Now it was unity, for which Christ prayed and it is a truth worth remembering, *that unity on the basis of God's word is easier to attain than uniformity on the opinions of men.*

The true solution then of the Union Problem lies here, absolute loyalty to the Word of God; a loyalty which shall respect the speech of the Bible, and shall equally respect its silence. That shall make no demands on the Christian, Christ has not made, and enforce no law on the sinner Christ has not given.

Let us enquire then :—

1. Do the Scriptures teach such a Union.

1. By analogy.—"The heavens" that "declare the glory of God," are a unit. All the kingdoms of nature make one harmonious whole, all are linked together by the same mysterious force of attraction.

"A golden everlasting chain,
Which in its strong embrace
Holds heaven and earth and main."

2. By direct statement.—The foundation principle is found broadly laid in the Old Testament scriptures: "Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one Lord," was the central truth around which Israel gathered. This is the bond of union which held this marvellous people together. The ark of the covenant, the temple, every act of their worship, spoke of one God and one people. Then look at their political economy, their social and family life, their marriage laws, their land laws and laws of possession and inheritance, their customs, and their very prejudices and you see that everywhere one God and one

Lord, meant one people. Now let it be noted, Israel departed from the word of God, then became divided. The traditions of men took the place of the simple laws of Jehovah, and the result was division and disaster. Was that division a sin? Who doubts it? The Israel of God is not the ten tribes nor the two, but the twelve, as John sees them in the Revelation.

3. Did Christ teach such a Union.—Hear Him, "I and my Father are one," and He used this fact as the reason for, and the measure of, our unity. In harmony with this foundation statement Christ both taught and prayed, "There shall be one fold and one shepherd," "By this shall all men know that ye are are My disciples if ye love one another." Then take that wondrous prayer in John 17. 20, do you ask the extent of that petition, "*All who believe.*" Do you ask its object? The *oneness of all.* The measure of that oneness? "*As thou art in me and I in thee,*" and what was the end to be served that Christ had particularly in view? I reply. "*That the world may believe.*" None need misunderstand the character of this union, for looked at in the light of this prayer it must

(A) Embrace all who believe in Jesus Christ.

(B) It must be such a oneness as that existing between God and Christ.

(C) It must be a oneness that the world shall know that Christ is the sent of God.

4. Did the apostles plead such a cause?—They did. Hear Paul, "*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no division among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment,*" see also Rom. 15: 5. 7. Such was the teaching of the apostle of the Gentiles, and with this teaching there was joined stern condemnation of the divisions he sought to cure.

5. Now note the figures used in the Epistles as descriptive of the children of God.—"The whole family in heaven and earth," "The Household of God," "The household of faith," "Brethren," "Citizens," "Children," "Fellow-heirs." Then the body, "members one of another," each dependent on the other, so that "the eye cannot say to the foot, I have no need of you."

6. Were these teachings of Christ and His apostles carried out in the early church?—As incidental, yet direct testimony, think of the address of these epistles, "To the church in Corinth," or Rome, or Ephesus. Evidently all the Christians in any one city or town was called the church there. They were one. Query: What would be the fate of a letter so addressed to any town or city to-day? It must wait till called for. Now read Acts 2. 42, and following verses, or Acts 4. 32. Even when the gospel was preached to the Gentiles they could rejoice. When the famine came their oneness was manifested by a splendid liberality. That division began, in apostolic times is clear, but it is also clear that there was for a time true unity. We get one more ray of light on this subject: it is the blessed fact that the oneness of God's people here is but a prelude to a more complete oneness in heaven. No division there, no jarring interests, no differing creeds, no varying test questions, no ecclesiastical barriers of human construction, but one family, one redeemed throng, one Hallelujah Chorus, "Worthy the Lamb." These differences must sooner or later be given up. Why not give them up now? and so adjust ourselves to the unmistakably clear demands of the word of God.

II. Is Christian Union desirable?

Certainly. Looked at in the light of God's word it is most desirable, for it is His commands. The psalmist

says it is "Sweeter than honey and the honey comb." Looked at from the human side there are good reasons why it is desirable.

1. It is desirable in the interests of a deeper piety and a larger spirituality.—Division has always been an enemy to Godliness. We say of all reformatory movements in religion, that they have necessarily passed through a period of fighting. But why? Because each came to the front in the interest of some long forgotten truth. But why fight for it? Because other religious bodies would not allow that it was truth, hence the strife. The new truth was oftimes antagonistic to existing institutions and teachings, yet in course of time it gained a foothold. It demanded recognition, and finally was admitted to its place as a truth of importance, yet how slowly, how unwillingly.

Thus existing divisions have always been a barrier to the reception of truth, and consequently to the godliness and piety that springs from a knowledge of that truth.

The persecution of Christians by Christians is one of the saddest fruits of the spirit of division, and every denomination has suffered more or less at the hands of those who chanced, in the providence of God to live before them. And let it be also borne in mind that much of this warfare and its accompanying persecution was not for truth but for the defence of human opinions and conceptions about that truth. Gods simple statements of truth when accepted by faith, never lead to strife but are peace producing and love producing. But strife comes in when we seek to bind on others our explanations and elaborations of that truth. The followers of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, with the Society of Friends, and the great Baptist body, have all suffered persecution. Now from whom did this persecution come? Every reader of this tract knows that it came from

their fellow Christians, and was the fruit of division in the ranks of the children of God. In every case it was truth, and piety, and godliness, hampered and hindered by a divided Christianity. Love, joy and peace do not grow in such air and atmosphere, but strife, and suspicion, and misunderstanding, and rivalry grow and thrive like noxious weeds. Let us labor then for union in the interest of a deeper piety and a truer love to God and men.

2. Union is desirable in the interests of a true economy of the churches spiritual power.—The churches power is to some extent wasted in unprofitable controversy; it is wasted in building up what is peculiarly our own. Denominational interests are apt to be first considered. He is a successful pastor who builds up his own church and extends its denominational influence. Now all the effort which goes to build up a party simply, is a waste of power, it is not doing the best for the kingdom of Christ, it is simply strengthening party walls, and is neither wise nor right, however necessary it may seem to have been in the past and certainly ought to be dispensed with now.

This consecrated army of ministers to whom the world owes so much is not being marshalled to the best possible advantage by the church. I am convinced that with a united church, there could be spared from this continent 5000 preachers during the next ten years to go to the foreign field and tell of Christ to those who now sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

3. The same thing is also true of the money power of the church.—There is a measure of waste, a lack of true economy in maintaining varied denominational establishments. In many places we spend our thousands and tens of thousands much of which might well swell the somewhat meagre amounts that go to the poor of our own land and the heathen of the far off corners of the earth; and

these expensive divisions are kept up when in many cases the difference as to the truth taught is scarcely discernable to the average worshipper, and he is dependent on the standards of his church to show him just what distinguishes him from his brother who calls himself by another name, and worships just across the street from him.

Let us not waste our talents thus, the day is not far off when the Lord will call us to account for our stewardship, and be it remembered it is not as to the *tenth* of all he gave us that he will require, but all time, opportunity, intellectual endowments, money, all he ever gave, for He will call for both principal and interest, "Mine own with usury."

4. Union is also desirable in the interests of aggressive warfare.—We have evils around us that can only be successfully fought by Christians collectively, so we unite our forces that we may achieve a victory over this or that particular evil. This is Christian union for one purpose, why not for all purposes? In such united work no man asks his fellow worker, as to creed or church or opinion, now what is possible as to work, for men, is surely possible as to worship, towards God. Think for one moment of the great grand work of evangelizing the world. What possible interest have the heathen in our denominational differences? Why should we seek to implant in their minds the seeds of a division that has brought forth such very undesirable fruits at home. I count it nothing less than a sin to burden the glorious Gospel with the mystifying and embarrassing rubbish of our ecclesiastical systems. There are evils to be met, giants of wrong to be slain, darkness to be illuminated. The army of the Lord need to present to all these an unbroken front. So I say, let there be union in the interests of this aggressive warfare against sin and the devil.

III. Practical Steps Towards Union.

That which is so clearly taught in God's word, and that which is so desirable for the best interests of the church of Christ, is surely possible. What practical steps can we take to aid so important a movement? Let us see: The past centuries have been centuries of reformation and to that extent have been helpful in preparing the church for present duties, but the great need of the day is not *reformmation*, but *restoration*. Not a reforming of evils in the church, so much as a return to New Testament truth on all subjects by the church. Much is being said and written on this question of union but few begin their study, where all must sooner or later come, by asking: What does the word of God say? We are seeking a platform broad enough and strong enough for all the redeemed hosts. Where is it likely to be found? In the wisdom of men? No! but certainly in the word of Cod. Denominationalism has not discovered it. No one party has a platform broad enough for even those whom they cheerfully allow are Christians. And to many thoughtful minds these differences have become so crystallized that it seems impossible to change them, or to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of union. But after all are these differences so difficult of adjustment? Let us see.

There are at least four important matters which have had much to do in producing the divisions we all deplore. The *Creed*, the *Government*, the *Name*, the *Ordinances*. Would it be possible to adjust ourselves to the Bible requirements in these matters? If so we shall have done much to forward the union of believers.

1. **The Creeds.**—What was the creed of the church in New Testament times? I unhesitatingly reply that it was a simple one, a sublime one. A confession of heart-felt

felt faith in this great fact, "That Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God," became the creed of the church: what more than this was required in the days of the apostles? Nothing. What purpose has been served by all the Articles of Faith ever written as explanations of this sublime creed? Compare with it the learned and often unexplainable products of the past centuries and its divine mightiness dwarfs them into insignificance. Yet this creed can be understood by a child, by the most ignorant who believes on Jesus, while the mightiest intellect and the most cultivated mind find that it contains all they need.

Practically do we not all admit that this is the true creed and all-sufficient, when we recognize as Christians, members of other churches, who so believe. I count a man a Christian because he believes with all his heart in the Lord Jesus Christ and obeys Him, not because of that which makes him a Methodist or Baptist. This was the only test question of the churches earliest and best days; the only one allowed by the scriptures, and sufficient for all purposes now. I see no reason why this ancient order of things should not be restored; and there is no church but would gain immensely, by making its creed that of the scriptures, and giving up every human production that has taken its place. All other tests, all other questions, do not make the man a Christian, they simply serve to distinguish him from other Christians, and to express his views and opinions on other matters. These views and opinions may be right and often are, but do not affect his standing as a Christian; he is that by reason of his heartfelt faith in the Son of God, and loyalty to Him, not by that which distinguishes him from other believers; and no good reason exists why we should seek to distinguish the children of God from the children of God, the saved from the saved. So let the creed of the Bible stand in all its divine perfection: faith in the Christ as the Son of God, no more and no less.

2. The Government of the Church.—What is it? What would you expect it to be? Answered in the light of the churches history, it is a divine institution largely under human direction. Answered in the light of the scriptures, it is a *divine institution under divine law.* Now the question of what is called church government is an important one, for at this point much of division has arisen. A restoration of the church to its primitive condition will solve this problem as it will all others. For it will bring into light the fact that Jesus Christ is the head of the church and none other, and that as the head He has given all the laws necessary for that church. Have the various and conflicting forms of church government grown out of the laws of the kingdom as laid down by the King? No. They have been the result of ignoring the King and his laws. Human methods of government have been applied to a heavenly kingdom.

How can we best rule and regulate the affairs of the church of Jesus Christ? has been the question honestly asked by the best of men when it would have been wiser to have asked, What has Christ the law giver said about it? Let it be remembered that Christ is the sole authority in His own church. Restore that authority, not in name only but in fact, make the word of God the statutes of the kingdom and you will have the problem of church government solved and all the cause of division on this point removed.

Should this be difficult? Certainly not. But on the contrary a thousand times easier than the present varied and complicated arrangements which are purely human, and constantly needing revision because they are human, and rest assured that whatever instruction Christ has given for the guidance of His people in matters of faith or practice will be found to be clearly stated; within our power to carry out and perfectly suited to the end for which they are

designed. Moreover, *is it not sin* as well as folly to set aside the sole authority of Jesus in His church.

3rd. We come to the question of name.—What is there in a name? Much. Either good or bad as the case may be. There is in a name whatever circumstances have put into that name, and in the matter before us it should be borne in mind that Christ has given names to His followers and God has given names to His children.

Human names for the children of God are unquestionably wrong. They are as certainly devisive. Indeed they were adopted for the express purpose of distinguishing between the members of the one family: a wholly unnecessary thing; for I repeat you do not need to distinguish between a Christian and a Christian. But these human names simply distinguish a Presbyterian from a Methodist and an Episcopalian from a Baptist. They do not describe a Christian, they only describe the peculiarities of that Christian; peculiarities, many of which ought not to exist, and were better not described when they do exist.

Now the New Testament provides names for the Children of God, names they are all perfectly willing to accept, but the existence of purely human differences have made an additional name seem necessary, so that while my brother has a perfect right to the name Christian, and might "Glorify God in this name," he is not satisfied with it alone but must needs add another to it, and this not to set forth his relationship to Jesus Christ, or to his fellow Christians, but to distinguish himself from them. In view of this fact is it surprising that we hear even the ministers of the Gospel sometimes glorying in the human, rather than in the divine name, and I am persuaded that the vast army of Methodists, and Presbyterians, and Baptists, and Disciples, and all others will be removing a serious barrier to union when they shall be wise enough and loyal enough to Jesus Christ not

only to sing "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds" but to be satisfied with it, and it alone, and to drop out of sight every human name, for every such name has grown out of a division already in existence, and will continue to perpetuate the divisions. Let individual Christians be known, as Disciples, or Brethren, or Saints, or Children of God, or any Bible name applied to them, for they are all these, and let the church in any one place be known as the Church of Christ in Corinth, or Rome, or Toronto, or Hamilton, and the whole Body of Christians everywhere as "Christians" and you have the matter of name at once adjusted to the word of God. You will remove what ever degree of division is properly chargeable to this account, and moreover you will do that which will meet the hearty approval of tens of thousands of the people of God in every denomination, and I am convinced that no step could be more easily taken than this.

The Ordinances—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord.

1st. **Baptism.**—A divided church is again divided into Baptists and Pedobaptists, over a simple and beautiful ordinance of the Lord Jesus which has in the past been a cause for division and a battle ground where much that was unlovely and unchristian was said and done; the one party holding to the Baptism of infants, the other maintaining that only believers should be baptized. The one party reasoning up to this conclusion from certain statements of both old, and new testament, the other pointing to the direct commands of Jesus and His apostles, and to the instances recorded in the Acts of the apostles and the Epistles. Again, the one party strenuously maintaining that baptism in this connection is the *immersion* of one who

believes in Jesus. The other that sprinkling water upon the candidate if not in accordance with the letter or in keeping with the practice of the early church, is at least allowable and a triumph of the Spirit over what they choose to call the mere letter of the command. The controversy is between two things so widely different, that the ordinary church member has little difficulty in deciding that one of the two must be wrong, but so hopelessly has this subject been entangled by the opinions of men that the simple Bible statements about it are lost sight of under an accumulation of theological rubbish and the searcher after the truth is seriously hindered thereby. The result is, the minds of thousands have been alienated from this question and have no clear conception of its nature and importance. Even ministers of the Gospel avoid it as a subject likely to destroy the peace of the searcher. Now is there no common ground where these divided hosts can meet. I reply there is, there must be Where shall it be found? In the word of God, by a return to the faith and practice of the early church in this matter as in the other matters to which I have already alluded, and even looked at from the human standpoint there ought to be no great difficulty, for even here, there are many points of agreement. Let me enumerate some of them :

1. All are agreed that there is such an ordinance as baptism commanded by Jesus Christ.

2. All are agreed as to its importance, so that none are willing to neglect it.

3. All are agreed that he who believes in Jesus with all his heart is a fit subject for baptism.

4. All congregations will accept such a baptized person into their communion, thus admitting the validity of his baptism and that when he has been immersed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover it is the general testimony of many of the leading authorities in all pedo-baptist denominations. that the immersion of a believer in Jesus Christ, is Christian baptism, that it is a command to believers, and that this was the practice of the apostles and the early church. I repeat then that there is a substantial agreement in these things.

On the other hand, there is a no inconsiderable portion of Christ's followers who say, (1) we believe we may without violating the spirit of the Gospel, extend the benefits of this ordinance to others than to believers; we believe that children are entitled to these blessings, and although we can find no direct command therefore, or certain instance of this act ever being performed on a child, yet we feel justified in extending its blessings to them: and (2) we believe that we are at liberty to change the form of this ordinance from that practiced by the apostles to one more suitable to our circumstances, and that sprinkling will be as acceptable to God as immersion, that the exact letter is of little consequence as compared to the spirit in which the act is performed; and this is briefly stated the height and length and breadth of this dividing line.

Now what is the reasonable course to pursue? The thoughtful Christian who cares more for the union of God's people than for denominational existence, will say at once let us return to the practice which God's word teaches, and let go that which at the best is but inference and deduction and conjecture. Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? then this command is undoubtedly for you. Obey it, and that speedily, and in that form which has never been questioned and which will be accepted by the church of Christ the world over. About the validity of the immersion of a believer there is no doubt, about the sprinkling of a babe there always has been and always will be.

Do you as a member of the great pedo-baptist body say, this will be making concessions to the Baptists, and we are not willing to do that. Rather ask, is this the Lord's will? and can I do this without violating the principles of the New Testament? And the answer must be; that the great pedo-baptist body can, and ought to do this in the interest of that union for which Christ prayed, and *they can do this without violating one New Testament principle*, otherwise how can they receive into their communion immersed believers.

2. The Lord's Supper.—It is refreshing to turn to the contemplation of an ordinance about which there is but slight disagreement amongst protestant bodies, and over which there need be but little said. "The Lord's Table," the "Broken Bread," the "Cup of Blessing," has its place to-day wherever Christians meet. A feast of loving remembrance, and of sweetest communion. It is true the number is increasing who gather round the table week by week, and reading that, "On the first day of the week, the disciples met to break bread," see in it a good reason for a weekly attendance, and find it a great blessing, while others are content with a less frequent observance, but this is never likely to mar the peace of the whole family of God, and the frequent gathering around the table of the Lord of members of different denominations is a hopeful sign. There is nothing that brings the children of God together like sitting at the Table of the Lord and remembering his sufferings and death, and the oneness of feeling and sentiment produced through this channel would come to us through every other channel of the Lords providing.

I have thus sought to set before you the scripture testimony touching Christian union. The desirability of that union and the possibility of a return to the faith and practice of the New Testament, as the only satisfactory means

to that end. But let it never be forgotten that there must be a return to the *spirit of the New Testament teachings* as well as an adjustment to the latter. The first steps towards division were heart wanderings, departures of the individual Christian from the faith and love of his Lord, and so a perfected union means a complete return in heart and life, perfect loyalty to Jesus and to the word of His grace. What will you as fellow Christians do to help forward this union, what sacrifices will you make, that you may help to gather the redeemed hosts of the Lord that there may be again "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all."

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